

## Chapter 7

### Teacher as artist / Artist as teacher

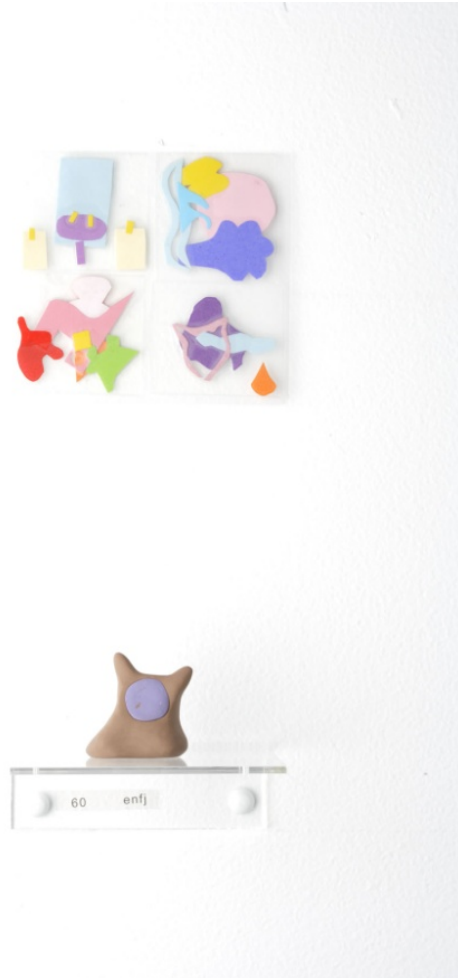
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*This chapter investigates my “lived-experience” (Van Manen, 1990) of art-making with children as an artist and teacher. It is an inquiry into the nature of my practice which encompasses children as the participants in, and audience for, the artwork. It encompasses a lived inquiry of making, documenting and writing about the process of the creation of art objects and the experiences of educational contexts. In so doing it captures the condition of functioning in the roles of artist and teacher.*

*The approach taken in this chapter is positioned within the “emergent paradigm” that “engage[s] in and respond[s] to the process of reconstructing childhood in society” (James & Prout, 1997, p. 8). The emergent paradigm challenges the “dominant framework” (James & Prout, 1997, p. 10) of childhood development and socialisation, which views childhood as natural and universal and influences sociological studies and socio-political contexts of childhood. The insights gained in this chapter extend the contributions made within the emergent paradigm and related “reconceptualist” practices in childhood education (Cannella & Kincheloe, 2002; Jipson & Johnson, 2001; Soto & Swadener, 2005) by investigating how teacher-artist ideologies of childhood affect art outcomes for both children and artists.*

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***Art creature (entj60 sfod) and quadrant of squares***



***Creatures and squares in the gallery***

### **Vignette 1: Gallery Stranger**

*She is a stranger to me, this child, in my gallery space.*

*I recognise...she wants to engage.*

*With me she engages through the objects venerating the space.*

- *Have you made these objects? - she asks.*

*She takes her time and considers each creature carefully.*

*She questions why it looks a particular way:*

- *Why does it have three spikes?*
- *Why does it have a blue patch?*
- *These are portraits of alien creatures - I tell her.*

*These objects now take on an animated quality:*

- *Why does it have three legs?*
- *Why doesn't it have a face?*

*She notices. She sees the coloured objects surrounding each creature.*

*She is interested in all the numerous shapes trapped in the plastic.*

- *This is a very pretty shape.*

- *Oh this one is sparkly, and this one is shiny.*
- *Wow, where did you get this one?*

*She notices all the details. These details that have been trapped by another. I notice it now. I can feel it. It dawns on me. A communication even is occurring.*

*I am communicating with this stranger not through myself, but through the objects.*

*The objects are motivating inferences.*

*"A social relation in the vicinity of objects".*

*The objects are communicating their particular language - from the multiple hands that collected, cut and arranged these shapes.*

*They are speaking. A voice talking to another like them.*

*They are connecting over time and space. And she understands.*

*The child stranger understands. She understands what this is all about. There are no extra words exchanged. No forced explanations. She does not know me, yet it is obvious to her.*

*She understood, when adults did not but required countless explanations.*

*She simply is with these objects.*

*She has passed the test.*

*She is clear-sighted. She is enlightened.*

*When the true audience revealed themselves to me - I felt confirmation.*

*I experienced authentication - when she privileged me with understanding.*

## **Introduction**

We seldom hear the experiences of teacher-artists who work with children in educational contexts. Yet the artwork that is generated in the classroom is intricately linked with the values that the teacher-artist holds regarding children and childhood.

As a teacher-artist I face a particular dialectical entanglement when making art with children. On one hand, my pedagogic voice tells me to be conscious of the power differential between adults and children. Therefore, I seek to privilege children's voice in art-making and engender a sense of ownership and freedom so that children can generate their own forms. However, as an artist, I am interested in the projected outcomes for my final

artwork that I make with the children. I am driven to realise a particular aesthetic for the work, and thus, in opposition to my initial sentiments, I steer the children away from generating purely their own visual responses. In these instances, I justify my level of control, as I feel that outside of my aesthetic constraints, outside of my artist construct, the forms that would be spontaneously generated by the children would tend to exhibit children's stereotypical art imagery. This is of course inherently problematic as the need to steer children away from such representations inevitably leads to the imposition of adult aesthetic values onto the children.

As teacher-artist I am also aware of how I construct childhood within our art-making and am also cognisant of the implications this has for our art-making encounters together. It suits my artistic projects to presuppose that children are somehow more attuned to their imagination, more capable of spontaneous meaning making, more able to generate fantastical stories. I feel that children are more engaged, more playful, and it is their playfulness that I require for my project to work. The construction of children as having greater access to their imagination, essentially frees them from the child-adult dichotomy of adult superiority over them. However, by maintaining that children are more than capable of generating spontaneous creative outcomes, children may be separated from the practices that would scaffold them towards generating more creative conceptions.

The above reflections capture one realm of classroom practice in visual arts, which has application for teacher-artists in their relationship with children around the artwork that is produced. As teacher-artists, are our presupposed ideas about childhood affecting the creative outcomes that are generated in the classroom? Is the way that we construct the art making experience based on our particular aesthetic theories, which may serve particular ideologies of childhood, and thus fundamentally shape the "child art" that is produced? Are we a hindrance to children's creative expression or are we the necessary guarantors of its manifestation? In this chapter, I explore the implications of these questions upon teacher-artist practice and what this means for visual arts experiences for children.

### **Constructions of childhood in art-making: Children as creative or imitative**

Children can be constructed as either innately creative beings, or as imitative beings who copy the social scripts handed to them by adults.

Similarly, adults who create art have been constructed to share similar characteristics as those that are used to define children. These constructions are conveyed via interpretations of children's art-making which affect how adults have been positioned in relation to their role in making art with children.

A common construct of childhood, which has been used to understand children's art-making, is the notion that children are naturally attracted to the unusual, are constantly creative, and make art out of anything (Szekely, 1991). Observing children playing at home, Szekely noted that children produce art on par with avant-garde artists, rather than the uninspired art they typically produce in school. Szekely views children as natural artists and that their natural approach to creating art is stifled by art practices in schools where children are often instructed to follow prescribed artistic rules derived from their teachers' understanding of art-making. Szekely (1991) argues that art-making with children should not be based on skill training but rather upon the provision of inspirational experiences through play. Such an approach breaks down conformity and sameness through imaginative performance. As play can lead to creative insights, and as playfulness is inhibited when children feel that their ideas come from somewhere else, children should be encouraged to learn *with* a teacher rather than *from* a teacher.

Although it may appear that Szekely (1991) is promoting a very child-centric approach, it is in fact what the adult does that becomes the significant factor in the artistic play of children. In order to demonstrate to children what it is like to be playful and creative, a teacher needs to be an "active, playful designer of the environment" (Szekely, 1991, p. 66). Szekely (1991, p. 68) goes on to describe the teacher as a performer who imagines, pretends, and is full of playful instruction:

words are carried from one artist – the teacher – to the other artists – the students – who translate them into images. This delicate process depends for success on belief, conviction, and interest – and an imaginative voice.

This quote illustrates the centrality of the teacher as performer. The teacher's role is to create fantasy, to use a particular kind of language, as this will make "a big difference on the students' perceptions and actions" (Szekely, 1991, p. 68). It reinforces that it is the adult rather than the child who constructs and maintains the play in the educational context.

Similarly, Pitri (2001) makes the connection between the commonality of play and art-making behaviours in that both processes involve inquiry, divergent thinking, exploration, experimental manipulation of media, spontaneity, risk-taking and expression of ideas. Pitri conceives of artistic play as an exploration with materials and problem solving through a specific design challenge. Play is productive and serves cognitive developmental functions through the development of problem solving skills. Unlike Szekely's (1991) artistic play, where children are referred to as artists, Pitri does not suggest that children are producing art – "artistic" is a term which refers to using materials to generate useable solutions.

The role of the teacher in Szekely's (1991) artmaking is a playful presence. In Pitri's (2001) context, the teacher's role is to provide only the initial prompt for the children and then allow the children's own experiences and plans to continue the play experience. As children are meant to play without following the teacher, Pitri (2001, p. 48) calls this the "liberation of the art classroom". Regardless of their particular perceptions, both Pitri and Szekely, in their conception of artistic play, challenge the notion of the teacher imposing rules on the play. For Szekely, artistic play involves the unleashing of creativity of the unusual and ambiguous type whilst for Pitri, creativity is linked with the generation of useable solutions.

This belief in children's innate creative ability has, however, been challenged by the notion that children more readily copy cultural schemas than represent innovative ideas (Ivashkevich, 2006; Kline, 1993; Thompson, 2006; Wilson, 2004). This notion is the basis of Thompson's (2006) exploration of the "Ket Aesthetic" in children's art-making. According to Thompson, the Ket Aesthetic embodies the preferences that children make in their visual representations when direct intervention from teachers or parents is removed. These representations comprise various popular cultural symbols, including imagery of favourite toys, TV characters, cartoon or comic imagery, and popular symbols like love hearts, stars, rainbows, and balloons. Thompson explains that these visual representations can often make adults feel uneasy due to the value of wanting to see children doing something worthwhile and serious. The resistance and discomfort also has to do with a perception amongst adults that the "innocence of childhood" is corrupted by popular cultural imagery:

Art educators felt the pangs of defeat whenever they saw evidence that children's drawings and paintings had become corrupted by adult imagery – often imagery of the “worst” sort, stolen from popular visual culture (Wilson, 2004, p. 314).

Kline (1993, p. 44) explains that “what might be taken for children's culture has always been primarily a matter of culture produced for and urged upon children”. He further asserts that a current cultural trend in childrearing is to provide children more freedom and more time for leisure activities that privilege playfulness. Consequently, play has become a product of the orientations of parents. He reinforces this belief with the example that, in early medieval society, children were more integrated into the daily life of adults as they worked with their parents and shared the same games and stories. There was not a separate world of childhood as children did not have a separate status or privileged position relative to adults. The creation of a separate entity of “childhood” in the nineteenth century created the separation of adults from children and resulted in the attribution of play as a distinct childhood quality.

### *Artists' utilisation of childhood*

A common construct of children's artmaking has been the conflation of the child and adult-artist in their “natural tendency to transform everyday objects” (Szekely, 1991). Fineberg (2006b, p. 6) proposes that a child is able to “transform everything at hand into the necessary elements of the fantasy” and suggests that this process is exactly what we appreciate in an artist's work. Using Picasso as an example, Fineberg suggests that we value his “childlike ability to overcome the fixity of meaning, known through experience and reason” (Fineberg, 2006b, p. 6) as well as his ability to create art works which destabilised the meaning of objects in order to ascribe new meaning upon them. Fineberg (2006b, p. 16) refers to child art as a kind of creative play, where the “forces of the unknown in the unconsciousness of childhood” are made evident. Children's art-making is championed when it demonstrates a certain precociousness, a giftedness. Childhood forms are fascinating when they closely resemble the expressive mimetic skills of adult artists. In the above examples, we discern that child art can be conceptualised as less encompassing than child's play in that it is limited only to the creation of products which are evaluated externally in a context removed from the experience of the child. This suggests a valuing of the child's artistic skills that afford a direct comparison with adult art.



Historically, the interest in studying children's art-making has focused almost exclusively on children's drawing. This interest emerged alongside a heightened interest in childhood in the mid-nineteenth century (Ivashkevich, 2006) where the preoccupation was with the study and classification of graphic representation with a focus on the quality of the drawings. It was only in the last decades of the twentieth-century that a more focused concern emerged in regard to the contexts and motivations of children's art production. This shift is evident in the conceiving of child drawing as symbolic play by Claire Golomb in the 1970s and the subsequent shift of focus from children's drawing as merely the imitation of reality to the transformation of reality by children (Ivashkevich, 2006).

Despite this movement towards a recognition of the transformative power of children's art late last century, Kindler (1997) noted an incongruity within the modern conceptualisation of artistic development. On the one hand, qualities such as expressiveness, spontaneity, authenticity, originality, and freshness are valued in child art; however, art which focused on realistic mimicry in traditional two dimensional surfaces have been typically used as a marker of children's development. Kindler identifies that the difficulties relating to understanding what constitutes artistic development can be attributed to the ambiguity of the term "art". As a clear definition of artistic development could not be articulated, terms such as children's "pictorial" or "graphic representation" have been used to discuss the artistic development of children.

### ***Modernist artists' utilisation of childhood aesthetic***

The construction of childhood as "an innocent and innately creative state of being, free from the conventions of culture" (Ivashkevich, 2006, p. 45) emerged with the romantic paradigm of modernism. Sullivan (2005) explains that modernism was preoccupied with a developmental approach to the species which resulted in the view that children and non-Western cultures belong to the lower ends of the developmental continuum. Both children's art and the art of non-western cultures were seen to hold expressive power "shaped by a compulsive urge to create in ways that were innocent and imaginative" (Sullivan, 2005, p. 19). Wilson (2004, p. 311) labels this notion "cultural primitivism" – "the belief that earlier states are better and purer because they are more innocent". Childhood was a "site of profound cultural symbolism" (Sullivan, 2005, p. 19) and represented a radical new way of seeing that modernist artists championed and were inspired by.

Fineberg (1997, 1998, 2006a) provides an account of modernism's fascination with child art. He asserts that:

immersion in the creativity of the child added vibrancy to their explorations of whatever was most fundamental to their aesthetic projects, whether it was the radical multivalency of images in Picasso's cubism or the relentless exploration of authenticity that dominated Klee's career. (Fineberg, 2006a, p. 87)

Fineberg (2006a, p. 92) explains that the interest in appropriating children's art forms stems from children's drawings representing a freshness and innocence in their interpretation of the world in visual form, and that what is called "innocence", "helps us distance our adult selves from the perseverance of thoughts too primitive to acknowledge".

In the constructed similarities between children's and artist's ways of seeing, Fineberg (2006a, p. 93) makes a distinction between the "most talented child" and the "adult master". Even though their work may share similar formal properties, the difference rests on the adult artist having an "intellectual grasp" of artistic strategies which the child does not, such as the artist having advanced artistic skills of visual representation and electing not to use them. Subsequently, "this ultimately gives his work a deeper meaning with respect to a wider range of intellectual issues than a child is able to engage" (Fineberg, 2006a, p. 93).

The distinctions and similarities between children's drawing and the works of artists that utilise children's artistic forms are also discussed by Arnheim (2006, p. 20) who suggests that although modernist artists were influenced by children's drawings (and also by the formal properties of "African carvings"), they knew nothing about the meanings, functions, and states of mind that produced these "unassuming" artifacts. In this way Arnheim seems to be sensitive to children's drawing by recognising them as the product of individual beings - as compared to other historians and critics of modern art who merely suggest that children's drawings are a "standardised product" and thus fail to attend to the actual intention of producers of the artifacts. However, Arnheim also introduces a deficit model of children's art production by suggesting that a key difference between adult artists and children is that children are not fully aware of the communicative power of art elements. In his view, children's art results are mere accidents which illustrate their weakness and lack of skill proving their inability to represent reality. In contrast, adult

artists, being aware of the communicative power of art elements, can use these formal properties in the expression of various concepts.

In summary, the “use of childhood” by modernist artists focused merely on copying a certain “child aesthetic”. This meant that these artists did not really delve into the notion of childhood but only took the forms that were created by the children. Artists “appropriated” the aesthetic or directly incorporated the forms created by children into their work. Such usage was related to ideas of reclaimed innocence and freedom from imposed schemata, identified as residing in children’s drawings as originality, spontaneity and authenticity. However, artists did not explore these qualities in themselves as inspirational, so the notion of “childhood” was not utilised in any sense beyond children’s formal representations.

### *The “uses” of “childhood”*

Custodero’s (2005) conception of the “childhood aesthetic” involves being “in the moment”, reveling in the seemingly miraculous moments of aesthetic insight. Recollections of early experiences tend to be deeply embedded and sensory, sensitive to experience, embodied, involving intimate knowing which “become” phenomena in free play. “Childhood aesthetic” involves: a sense of wonder and deep knowing; the ability to imagine and invent; an openness to possibility; and, an orientation towards discovery. It is infinitely ingenious, persistent, curious, and exploratory. It involves being in a state of flow when engaging in aesthetically rewarding activity. In this flow state, one is absorbed in long periods of engagement. Here, goals are clear, there is immediate feedback and action is consequential. This “childhood aesthetic” engages a special humility infused with joy and freedom from value judgment around the creative work. Unfettered from self-judgment, one is free to “be with” and experience one’s own personal criteria for beauty. Concerned with process rather than product, there is an acceptance of not knowing. One is comfortable with imperfections, ambiguity and doubt. In “childhood aesthetic”, one is drawn to knowledge that is not easily articulated and captures the feeling of times past when things couldn’t be completely understood. Custodero (2005) claims that this anti-intellectual logic of the child is an answer to overcoming the limitations of over-analytical adult concepts of logic.

The implication of this perspective for teaching is the provision of an unstructured environment that allows the learner to carve out a path for themselves, as well as an obligation to be with children to understand their purposes so as to understand the world through their viewpoint. The honouring

of childhood moments of “exuberance and wonder”, will lead to creative work that is seen by Custodero (2005, p. 54) as the “respectful attention and acknowledgment of the transformational potential they provide”.

In the above examples, Custodero (2005) promoted a childhood aesthetic of “being with” as a key component in “childhood’s legacy” to adult creativity. As children’s creations were not dismissed as cute or charming, nor merely seen as a preparation for adulthood, Custodero claims that the “childhood aesthetic” is not an example of the romantic idealisation of childhood creativity. However, Custodero does not acknowledge that her perspective on the nature of “childhood aesthetic” may have been shaped by expressionistic theories of the aesthetic which suggest that children have some special, intuitive, insight that is shared with adult artists.

In the framework presented by the “u-curve shape of artistic development” (Davis, 1997), young children’s drawings are evaluated to be as creative as adult artists, with a decline in expressiveness in middle childhood. In this framework, Custodero’s (2005) “childhood aesthetic” would only encompass children between the ages of 2-6, as middle years childhood would not represent “spontaneous creativity” but the desire for imitation. The childhood that Custodero (2005) refers to is ubiquitous and universal. Custodero’s childhood’s aesthetic conveniently avoids the “Ket Aesthetic” (the imitations of popular cultural scripts discussed earlier).

The implication of ‘childhood legacy’ is not all encompassing of children. Rather than suggesting that all children who are naturally creative grow up and somehow transform into un-creative adults who then need to be re-inspired by children’s creativity, it could be that we just “go on” (Horton & Kraftl, 2006a) and become the type of adults that we were as children - creative or uncreative. Childhood and adulthood are not separate where ‘they’, the children-objects, are the alien species that provide ‘us’, adult humans, with transformational potential for creative generation.

As teacher-artists we can perhaps begin to glimpse how artmaking with children has been conceptualised. Initially I indicated how I was drawn to ‘utilising’ children in my art practice because of my belief regarding a ‘childhood aesthetic’: the manifest joy of children; their eagerness to contribute and discover; their acceptance of ambiguity; and, their willingness to be in the moment without needing a specific goal or outcome. In this context, my approach to children was similar to Custodero’s (2005). However,

it is evident that my approach reinforced a romantic ideology of childhood. Even though attentive to children, my art practice still viewed children as an object with projected ideologies about humanity - an object largely untainted by negative conceptions, encompassing purity and virtuousness and existing as a hope for all of our futures. Given that adult assumptions about child art affect the art that is produced, it is necessary to examine how changing these assumptions can realise art which is more authentic to the experience of children and how such a change can free children from being conceptualised as objects, transforming them into active participants in the process of art making.

### ***Child art as adult construct***

One of the most important tasks for those of us who teach art and who inquire into the visual cultural products of young people is to uncover hidden ideological positions held by ourselves and other pedagogues who have initiated students' art-making activities and to recognise our own biases (Wilson, 2004, p. 321).

...teachers and researchers are not sufficiently aware of the consequences of their aesthetic theories. Researchers, like art teachers, have artistic preferences and aesthetic theories that influence the way they interpret children's art (Wilson, 2004, p. 91).

In *Child Art after Modernism: Visual Culture and New Narratives*, Wilson (2004) provides a thorough and extensive critique of the unquestioned assumption that child art is a natural, creative act originating purely from the child. He asserts that the art of children, which has been assumed to be least affected by culture, is actually the product of adult intervention. Rather than representing a spontaneous, creative act, child art created by modernist art educators is actually a cultural construction. Wilson (1997, 2004) maintains that the belief in children's innate creativity and innocence, the belief that children make art spontaneously by themselves, and the belief that children are more creative or exhibit creativity differently to adults are all products of modernism's grand narrative whereby the artist is constructed as a producer of art objects, unconstrained by convention.

In relation to art education practices, Wilson (2004) contends that teachers exercise control over the production of children's representations. School art production reflects modernist beliefs about children's innocence as the art produced conforms to what child art should look like in terms of subject

matter and style. This can include “topics from everyday life, holidays, festivals, and illustrations of fairy and folktales” (Wilson, 2004, p. 324). He further asserts (2004, p. 325) that “a philosophy of art is the single most underdeveloped area pertaining to the visual artifacts produced by children”.

I have suggested throughout this chapter that it is largely a conceptual interpretation which either denotes the objects created by children as art-like things or not-art-like things. These differing interpretations are in turn based on the different ideologies, values and aesthetic positions of the interpreters. By definition, this determines perspectives regarding how child art develops and the function it plays in children’s lives (Wilson, 1997). As definitions change concerning what is classified as art in the art-world, similar processes occur in relation to the interpretations made about child art. Wilson (1997) provides the following example. From a past perspective, the skilful depiction of linear perspective was the criterion to judge something as art. “As most children were unable to master these rigorous conditions, the things they could do, their drawings on walls, for example, were probably viewed by adults and children alike as little more than play” (p. 82). As these conventions were rejected by modernist artists, and other criteria became more prominent, children’s art again was granted the status of “art”.

Wilson (1997) outlines that children’s creations can be interpreted from varying perspectives - from an art theory perspective which will tell us about art world values; from the perspective of the child’s world which will tell us about the child’s motives, cognitive and developmental states; and, from an educational perspective, which will provide values about educational goals and judgments regarding the child as an artist. What is most significant is that the child’s art is not the only sign that is being interpreted here, but:

Our interpretations are also signs; when we watch ourselves and others in the act of interpreting child art, we learn something about the assumptions and aesthetic theories on which interpretations are based (Wilson, 1997, p. 83).

Thus, the interpretation, and the subsequent understanding of children’s artwork, is based on three interrelated components: the child’s object (what has been represented / expressed); the conditions under which the art was made (the context that the child is in and the art tradition that is influencing the art production); and, the interests, values and assumptions of the people who are interpreting the object.

Teachers and researchers shape the art of children on the basis of their assumptions of what art is and ought to be. As visual art continually redefines itself through continual subversions of previous forms, so should interpretations pertaining to child art be redefined. Wilson (1997, 2004) promotes the view that child art should reflect contemporary art practices with the creation of installation or performance art, as well as address complex issues like politics or feminism (Wilson, 1997, 2004). He suggests a “philosophy of child art” which includes the premise that if artworks can be anything, and given that the artist-teacher exerts control in relation to what is produced by children, then artworks can be jointly created:

that question the assumed nature of child art; produce child-artworks that look like adult-artworks; make artworks in which there is a conscious effort to mix child-like and artist-like images; make artworks that mimic and mix styles; make artworks that are consciously anti-visual or anti-aesthetic; or make works for the purpose of attempting to transform them into artworks through multiple acts of interpretations (Wilson, 2004, p. 325).

The purpose of the creation of child art would then be to “raise philosophical questions about the nature of child art” (Wilson, 2004, p. 325).

#### **Vignette 1: “social relations in the vicinity of objects”**



*Three quadrants of squares*



*Four creatures and six quadrants of squares*

*Wilson (2004) challenges us as teacher-artists to redefine the child art that is produced in the classroom and, in one sense, become aware that our desire to view the art of children in an aesthetic context says more about our own ideology of aesthetic veneration, than anything about children and what matters to them.*

*The problem with “child aesthetics” is that it tends to remove the aesthetic response from the social context in which the art-work manifested itself. What tends to happen when looking at children’s art, is that an aesthetic context is applied to the work (by placing it in the gallery and having discussions about its formal qualities) to make the “child other” accessible to the “an art-public” or the visual arts domain. In other words, child art is made accessible to the adult. This point has been a central argument mounted by Gell (1998), when discussing the problem of “indigenous aesthetics” in his “anthropological theory of art”.*

*Interpreting children’s products in the light of an “aesthetic theory of art” (formal aesthetic qualities) does not allow entrance into children’s experiences. The potential danger of displaying children’s objects as “art” in an exhibition context is that Western art theories may be deployed to understand the work. As is the case with non-Western art, this perspective*



*removes the actual context of production of the work. Thus, in one sense, the work is rendered meaningless. The placement of the work in a gallery, outside of its context of production (such as a classroom context) may result in the work being approached in terms of particular aesthetic criteria. These judgements are inappropriate as when the social context of the production of the work is removed, so too is the function of the work. Gell (1998) argues that a non-Western artwork may not function to be venerated as a beautiful object, but rather as an “index” of application of social interaction. “The art object is defined as a mediator of social interactions, where the function emerges within the social relations in the vicinity of objects mediating social agency” (Gell, 1998, p. 5). In my artist residency, the creation of an object allowed the coming together of adult and child. It engendered a dialogue and permitted a connection to be made around the object. These objects have aesthetic qualities, but more so, they afford a connection to the child participant/audience, rather than the external evaluation by an audience for their independent aesthetic merit.*

*However, I still cannot deny that I experience a sense of the aesthetic in the work created with the children. In this context, this aesthetic is something experienced by the maker of the work, rather than an objective marker. For Eisner (2001), the experience of the aesthetic in art-making deals with a satisfaction gained from working with materials. The experience of art-making is not about following rules but about embodied experience and following nuance. Making judgments about the qualities of a work – qualities being “phenomena that can be experienced by the senses” (2001, p. 136) - depends on a “rightness of fit”, as an artist has a “feeling” about the relationships of these qualities (Eisner, 2004). Further,*

*The unique quality of experience that a particular shade of blue engenders, or the relationship between that shade of blue and, say, a field of gray on which it is situated (Eisner, 2001, p. 136).*

*The temperature of a colour might be a tad too warm, the edge of a shape might be a bit too sharp, the percussion might need to be a little more dynamic. What the arts teach is that attention to such matters matter (Eisner, 2004, p. 5).*

*Eisner is suggesting that the experience of art-making is the development of an understanding that these little nuances really matter. This resonates with Horton and Kraftl’s (2006a, 2006b, p. 259) notion of “what matters to*

*children” - a recommendation for teacher-artists to reconnect with the “ostensibly banal, low key, everyday things, places, embodiments and events”.*

*To illustrate how these “everyday things” matter to children (in my project, 8 – 11 year old girls) within an art-making space, and to re-connect with a particular experience of the aesthetic, I now recall, in the vignette below, the process of creation which resulted in the “quadrant of squares” in my project. Asking what matters to children in this encounter, and reflecting on how I experience the work, helps to reveal the function of my art objects - the extent to which the aesthetic is articulated, and the level of “social relations in the vicinity of objects” (Gell, 1998, p. 7).*

*The use of language here will shift slightly to the everyday and contextualised as a way to “recreate the lived world that the research describes” (Barone, 2001, p. 25). Responding to the work aesthetically, in terms of traditional art appreciation, the viewer may see a pleasant arrangement of abstract shapes. Institutionally, these arrangements may remind the viewer of the seemingly random shapes of Kandinsky. Semiotically, the viewer may respond by thinking that what they are seeing is some sort of language or code trying to communicate a message...*

*If the viewer looks more closely they are drawn by the materiality of the shapes that are made of various crafty-paper materials, maybe reminiscent of the little paper off cuts found on the classroom floor. Some arrangements are neat and precise in their composition. Some are rough, untidy, compositionally clunky and slightly inept.*

*The shapes, the remnants of experience, are trapped and suspended in time, in a context alien to itself. They are frozen in their display, the voices are gone, the joy cannot be perceived. They are the artefacts left behind by an ancient civilisation - the viewer tries to discern their functions, but the people are long gone. With only a fragment of them in their hands, with their modern eye, they give interpretation of use. The presence of the bodies are long gone; the bodies that enacted existence via the artefacts - the stories realised around the objects, the pleasures but also the emergent frustrations. All that is left are these objects under a cold gaze. The viewer does not feel it - the viewer does not, and cannot, experience what it was like, how*

*the objects were not separate, but were attached and part of being.*

*I look at the objects and I sense the moments, the countless experiences of which they were a part. They seemed only to be created for the purpose of interaction, not formalistic object veneration. It is only these experiences that matter, the experiences that occurred through the objects. The objects are meaningful only as they speak to me of the moments I remember. The materiality and the everydayness of the experiences, the things that mattered in these moments of children's lives, the things that mattered to me.*

*I recall the classroom and the children within - the trouble of cutting the tiny shapes with their small hands, how some were so dexterous and proud of their skills, and others tried so hard, and had enormous difficulty in managing the scissors around all the tricky corners. How it mattered that you had sharp scissors, and how endless minutes were spent going through the scissor rack to find the best pair. How the colours of cardboard that you got really mattered, how the little smidgen of pink paper was the most significant item that you possessed at that moment - or the light pink the other group had was an intangible object filled with desire. How important it was to find a pale lilac pink, and how the shape just would not work without it. How significant the pieces of specialty paper were amongst the coloured-cardboard-sameness. That to have a new sheet of cardboard mattered. It was not good enough to have a piece that already had bits cut out of it, even though only a tiny piece was needed. That grey and brown cardboard were the most plentiful but obviously unwanted. Pink and purple and red were the ones that were needed the most, the ones that were begged for, the ones that you would plead to acquire. That being able to cut out squiggly bits, and things that looked like the perfect raindrop or love heart really mattered. That sticky tape is really really annoying, especially its habit of making its seam disappear, making it impossible to unravel. That grand procedures needed to be devised to deal with the misbehaviour of the sticky tape - sticking to desks, sticking to oneself. That there is a heap of trouble in trying to capture all*

*the little pieces in the sticky tape - the sticky tape electrifies the shapes to itself perfectly, or if done haphazardly or even just randomly, you lose your composition. The most horrible part is the sticky tape's bubbles and creases. The jealousy and frustration of the one that can do hers neatly and properly when some get it all scrunched up all the time. That surface is important - without a proper surface, the sticky tape will just not work.*

*How exciting it is to triumphantly finish your square, when you can come up to the front and get your little shape laminated. That it is exciting if you get to push it through the machine and how it comes out all changed at the other end. How important it is to keep it and to take it home. These little bits of coloured cardboard really matter.*

*The sheer joy and excitement and adventure during the time when shape words are called out. "Now cut out a shape that looks a like an naughty fairy". The called-out shape names build up the excitement. How the preposterous nature of the names is motivating, humorous, exciting. How a simple activity of cutting out coloured bits of cardboard is exhilarating. How varied and rich the responses are in our interaction together – more than anything a finished product can tell us. In these moments, I feel the being in the moment with the children, where it really does not matter what the outcome is at the end. It is just that we are here together, trapped in a continuous performative moment of the "theatre of the absurd" and that we can somehow establish a shared dialogue and connection. Life still seems wondrous and exciting, experienced in its simplicity. All these experiences are involved in the creation of a final form. The forms, trapped in the laminated square, are voiceless if we are not aware of the social context of production. However, it is the experiences that tell us the story of "being with", and what matters in these encounters of art-making.*

### Reflections on “social relations in the vicinity of objects”

The children’s art objects (*quadrant of squares*) function as “indexes” of the social interactions that occurred in relation to a certain set of circumstances. The *art creatures* and related art productions have afforded social interaction. Although they possess an aesthetic quality, they are not intended to be functional in themselves as art objects – they can be considered as functioning as “pre-inventive structures” (Finke, Ward & Smith, 1992) or “transitory objects” (Winnicott, 1971). The purpose of questioning what matters to children is to uncover the constructed art-making spaces of childhood, so that, as artists-teachers, there can be a connection to the lifeworlds of children for more tactful and thoughtful action (Van Manen, 1991).

The children approached the art objects in their everydayness. They entered the world alongside the other objects of the world and are compared to them in their everydayness. Children will ask of the object everyday questions like: How did you make this spike? What did you make it out of? It looks like... It reminds me of... This is in contrast with questions from the adult art world: How is it contextualised to other artworks? How does it communicate an intention? If the art object then becomes animated by the child (Winnicott, 1971; Singer, 1973), a new set of questions and circumstances will arise. The object is transformed into a living being and will afford questions that are afforded to living beings: Why does it do this? What does it like? Where is it from?

Eisner’s (2001) “nuances” were experienced in the materiality of art-making. These nuances included the particular shade of pink, the particular “rightness” of a shape, the quality of the cardboard, the embodiment of the scissors or sticky tape, the transformatory effects of the laminate. The experience of the aesthetic in everydayness and materiality and “rightness of fit”, I experience within my art-making. The creation of a particular aesthetic for an exhibition existed within the dialectic tension of creating “art-world” art and children’s “Ket Aesthetic” (Thompson, 2006). I wanted to create an exhibition to which children contributed but which challenged the assumption of the dichotomy between children and adults. I wanted to challenge current thinking which suggests that children’s art-making should be relegated to some separated unimportant part of the gallery; or the assumption that artists would not exhibit the work that they did with children as it was not perceived to be

the artist's oeuvre, and therefore not legitimised as art belonging to the art world.

My intention to exhibit children's art-work as a component of my work created a particular aesthetic dilemma. My intention to challenge the adult-child dichotomy of the dominant framework, through an exhibition context, meant that I wielded aesthetic control over children to create a certain level of work. Consequently this undermined the truly meaningful part of the work of the children - their own knowledge contribution and their voice about what mattered to them. In my dialectical entanglements, I was entranced with the idea that I needed to "get the best art" out of the children, to justify how my project was "better" than others. In this sense, I wanted the children to produce these "quality" things for myself and not for them. Seeking to elicit the most aesthetically-pleasing artifacts from the children as a representation of my effectiveness as teacher-artist saw the construction of the child as an object enacted upon by others, inherently vulnerable and incompetent, as opposed to child as subject to be engaged with in developmentally-appropriate ways (Christensen & Prout, 2002). In striving for an aesthetic product from the children, I yielded to the "institutional aesthetic theory" applying the definitions of art to those that were not operating on art-world terms.

This process of "aestheticisation" (displaying the objects in a formalised exhibition leading the children towards highly polished work) was a way of equating children, and their reactions, with those of adults. In one sense, this was one of my emancipatory intentions, an attempt to liberate the art work of the children, to reduce the othering of children by bringing them closer to the institutionalised world of adults. However, this contradictory act meant that this elevation to the realm of adults resulted in the continuation of their control via the dominant positions of development and socialisation.

## **Conclusion**

From my perspective, and as noted by Walsh (as cited in Thompson, 2006, p. 38) the adult stands before "the situated, specific, 'historical child'", rather than "an 'eternal' child – timeless, universal, essentially unchanging". What this means for art making with children is that particular conceptions of childhood will result in different pedagogic conceptions. For example, Arnheim's (2006) position on the inability of children to understand the communicative power of art elements would suggest that abstract explorations may be completely irrelevant and inappropriate. However, from an artistic play

perspective (Custodero, 2005; Pitri, 2001, Szekely, 1991), where children are believed to hold an innate tendency for symbolic transformation, making meaning from abstraction would be a natural occurrence. In turn, these differing pedagogic positions highlight that it is the adult, not the child, who is responsible for the creation of “child art” through the activities conducted and the interpretations made about children’s products (Wilson, 1997, 2004). It is the construction of what childhood is meant to encompass which removes children’s art-making from contemporary practices of artists.

The above insights provide a context through which teacher-artists can gain an understanding of their own ideological positions towards art-making practices with children. In my case, the underlying ideology of childhood - based on innate playfulness which brought with it notions of creativity, fun and spontaneity – resulted in a perception of children as objects to be utilised for my adult-centric purposes. I entered into my work with children with the romantic conceptions of the use of children for aesthetic gains.

As teacher-artists we need to develop an increased awareness of how we construct childhood and thus our art-making together. This involves being conscious to exclude, where possible, “dominant” art education practices where the “art” in pedagogical encounters poses limitations on what both the children and the teacher-artist can produce. Importantly, our ideologies related to the aesthetic veneration of objects, may move us away from the experiences of children and what matters to them in our encounters together. As artist-teachers our connection to embodied experience should make us more attuned to the shared moments of our lives with children, and connect and learn from the little things “that go on and on and on in the background; from stuff that is often unnoticed, often unsaid, often unsayable, often unacknowledged and often underestimated” (Horton & Kraftl, 2006b, p. 259). However, it may always remain the case that it is only a child who can experience these little things speaking to them – a secret language which excludes the adult world from intruding – “and no grown-ups will ever understand why it is so important!” (Saint-Exupéry, 1943/1995, p. 107).

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